

Dear Ariane,

Thank you for your letter requesting more detailed information on the declaration of local housing emergencies across Scotland and on local strategies to respond to the housing emergencies.

I also note the Committee's requests for brief information on issues associated with empty council homes and local strategies for buying homes on the second-hand market that we understand local authority Chief Housing Officers (ALACHO) have covered in greater detail.

Firstly, you will be very much aware that the Scottish Government formally declared a Housing Emergency on 15 May in the Parliament. Prior to that, five of our member councils Edinburgh, Glasgow, Fife, West Dunbartonshire and Argyll and Bute Councils had all declared local housing emergencies.

Following the Scottish Government's announcement in May, five more local housing emergencies have been declared by West Lothian, Scottish Borders, South Lanarkshire, Angus and Dumfries and Galloway Councils to make almost a third of councils.

The key drivers for the declaration of local housing emergencies have been challenges to housing supply and in the delivery of homelessness services. Currently we understand those councils that have declared housing emergencies are developing local action plans, relevant to their local circumstances to practically respond. At this stage, not all the Councils that have declared emergencies have published their action plans.

We understand from the published action plans and from discussion at a recent meeting of the COSLA Community Wellbeing Board on 23 August which I chaired, that there are several common themes resulting in some of the following actions:

- Increasing/maximising lets to homeless households including RSL lets;
- Reducing voids and relet times;
- Improving processing times for emergency payments to support quicker moves into settled housing;
- Bringing empty private sector homes back in to use;
- Purchasing properties on the second-hand market for use as either temporary accommodation or mainstream lets;
- Increasing activity to prevent homelessness;
- Improving the response to domestic abuse to move to a "perpetrator moves" approach where possible and safe to do so;
- Improving housing outcomes for those leaving prison;
- Improving access to the private rented sector for homeless households where this is appropriate;
- Exploring or extending private sector leasing schemes;
- Increase access to Housing First type services; and working closely with a variety of voluntary and statutory partners including IJBs and health boards and specialist providers of services to those long term in the homelessness system.

Further, we understand a RAG (Red/Amber/Green) report compiled by Chief Housing Officers (ALACHO) underlines that a "focus on flexibility in supporting local responses, rather than centrally driven solutions is likely to be most effective". In particular, ALACHO have advised that much more flexibility and responsiveness is needed in the delivery of the Affordable Housing Supply Programme.

In relation to empty council homes we understand that some of our member councils such as Fife, Edinburgh and North Lanarkshire have been reducing their voids significantly e.g. we understand North Lanarkshire Council some months ago managed to reduce their voids by around 50%. Voids have been reduced in councils by a range of approaches including:

- Improving the performance of utility companies;
- Suspending routine repairs to focus on void turnaround;
- Tenancy support to minimise properties being returned in very poor condition; and
- Workforce planning to improve the supply of tradespeople.

To address voids, local authority Chief Housing Officers have been working with Scotland's Housing Network to gather a monthly snapshot of Council void numbers. We understand this data collection started in May this year and the initial returns suggest that progress has been made. We anticipate local authority Chief Housing Officers and Scotland's Housing Network will be able to provide a more complete picture based on a full set of returns in the near future.

At a political level, to respond to issues with utility companies, COSLA and the Scottish Government have issued correspondence to utility companies to establish and facilitate a more structured approach to engagement, given the long delays for empty properties to be connected and meters to be fixed that has had a negative impact on voids being re-let timeously. We expect to be able to report on progress on this over the forthcoming weeks.

Local property purchase programmes i.e. buying homes on the second-hand market has been a feature of both the Affordable Housing Supply Programme and local investment programmes for many years. They offer a flexible way to meet specific needs and extend social housing provision into areas that may have significant levels of private renting and owner occupation but no affordable homes. Second hand homes are also usually less expensive than new build though repair and improvement costs can be considerable.

We understand most of our member councils tend to focus on buying homes previously sold under the right to buy, "buybacks" as they are often called, but in other areas there has been a deliberate effort to purchase suitable properties in private developments. The Scottish Government has been generally supportive of local house purchase schemes and has been willing to fund them through the AHSP provided that they are part of a clear strategy, and the overall programme is included in the SHIP. There have, however been some concerns about inconsistencies and a lack of transparency around the level of grant made available and the variation of grant levels between our member councils.

Finally, in my capacity as co-chair of the Housing to 2040 Strategic Advisory Board (SAB) I attended a special meeting of the SAB recently with the Scottish Government that involved leading representatives from Scotland's Housing Sector. At the meeting it was broadly agreed actions should be taken forward based on recommendations proposed by a Housing Coalition to address Scotland's Housing Emergency.

For Local Government, these proposed actions include supporting the increased use of 'flipping' a tenancy where a property meets the household's need through developing joint guidance based on established good practice from councils. As well as meeting with energy suppliers in the autumn to review progress on reducing voids and ensuring data on households' needs is shared so that offers to homeless households can be made quickly.

We trust our response is helpful to the Committee's considerations.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Maureen Chalmers,
COSLA Spokesperson for Community Wellbeing